



Baby boomers are isolating themselves as they age. That's bad—for everyone

By Laura L. Carstensen

A LARGE BODY OF RESEARCH SHOWS THAT EMOTIONAL experience improves with age. People are slower to show anger and more prone to see silver linings. They solve emotionally charged conflicts more effectively and are more likely to forgive and forget.

So the prospect of millions of baby boomers entering a stage in life that brings wisdom and emotional balance has many researchers excited about the possibility that they will, as they enter their final years, build a better world. After all, not only are boomers distinguished by their numbers, which will intensify their impact on society, but they are also different from earlier cohorts of aging Americans: going gently into that good night doesn't appeal to a generation that, in its youth, wanted to start a social revolution.

But a sobering finding has emerged from the Stanford Center on Longevity's Sightlines Project (sightlinesproject.stanford.edu). We tracked six age cohorts across historical time on variables that predict length and quality of life. The study is based on analyses of eight nationally representative, high-quality, multiyear studies involving more than a million Americans over two decades. The Sightlines Project monitors the percentages of Americans in each age group who are doing well in areas critical to long-term well-being. Instead of comparing younger people with older people, Sightlines compares people today with people who were the same age 15 to 20 years ago. In this way, we produce a dynamic snapshot of trends, for better and for worse.

THERE IS AMPLE EVIDENCE that social engagement has positive effects on health and longevity. Social isolation is as strong a risk factor for early mortality as cigarette smoking. Which makes the findings about social engagement among boomers startling. The 55-to-64-year-olds just about to join the ranks of the elderly are far less socially engaged now than their predecessors were at the same age 20 years ago. And this pattern emerged across virtually all traditional measures of social engagement: Boomers are less likely to participate in community or religious organizations than were their counterparts 20 years ago. They are less likely to be married. They talk with their neighbors less frequently. And it doesn't stop with participation in communities and neighborhoods: boomers report fewer meaningful interactions with their spouses and partners than did previous generations, and they report weaker ties to family and friends.

Should we be worried about these trends? Possibly, though the portrait sketched by the Sightlines data generates

THE ME GENERATION

78.8 million

Number of U.S. boomers at their peak population in 1999; that decreased to an estimated 74.9 million in 2015, according to the Pew Research Center

70%

Percentage of people ages 51 to 70 who are online and have a Facebook account, compared with 88% of millennials, according to a 2014 study by GlobalWeb-Index

hypotheses rather than definitive answers. It is possible, for example, that boomers, especially women, are working longer, which offers its own kinds of social connection. Another possibility is that they are interacting in nontraditional ways, using social media and participating in global communities, though this is unlikely to fully explain the phenomenon, given that many boomers remain digitally averse. But it is also possible that patterns of social disengagement reflect the price that boomers will pay for having rejected family values and traditions many years ago. Boomers are, after all, the most divorced generation in history.

Whatever the reasons, the sheer size of this generation means that these behavioral changes may endure for those that follow. The findings are especially intriguing since this is the generation that proclaimed that the world should have higher standards and sparked great changes in our society in order to realize them. If boomers bow out, a very different scenario may unfold.

SPECIFICALLY, their health may suffer as they withdraw from meaningful engagement. But if they stay engaged as they age, boomers may spark a second social revolution. This revolution wouldn't look like the revolution imagined back at Woodstock; there would be far less chanting in the streets. Instead, boomers could become an army of millions of gray-haired people, better educated than any previous generation, armed with unprecedented financial resources and decades of experience, ready to solve the practical problems of life. This revolution could finally help the nation become a better place for young people. As Marc Freedman, the CEO of Encore.org, says, "Maybe we can stop trying to stay young and instead rally to help people who actually are." Now wouldn't that be a fitting legacy for the Woodstock generation?

Carstensen is the director of the Stanford Center on Longevity